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# Sex and New York: Female Relationships in Wharton and Bushnell<sup>1</sup>

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Although published nearly a century apart, the works of Edith Wharton and Candace Bushnell grapple with the same issue of women's efforts to establish independence in New York City. Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1905 and 1920, exemplify this struggle in a naturalist tradition, where women find fulfillment and survival only as objects of men's affections. The urban city, traditionally characterized as a masculine space in which society places women in a subordinate position, sets the stage for several of the authors' works, in which women attempt to gain social footholds among men who wield their professional and financial power over them.

Yet Bushnell's *Sex and the City* and *Lipstick Jungle*, published in 1997 and 2005, are examples of the "chick lit" genre and depict women who rely on their female relationships for support as they navigate through the brutal social and professional waters of New York. The strong female friendships in Bushnell's novels contrast with the lack of such relationships in Wharton's novels, in which the female protagonists battle the male-dominated city alone, sometimes receiving criticism rather than support from other female characters. Although in many ways the New York City inhabited by Bushnell's characters, compared to the city inhabited by Wharton's, features more blatant displays of hegemonic masculinity and a more rigid capitalist system, these very developments in capitalism enable Bushnell's characters to establish their independence. Her characters are working professionals who are active members

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of the capitalist system. The female relationships in Bushnell's novels show how contemporary fictional narratives provide a venue for women writers to depict female friendships as the ideal partnerships in inherently masculine spaces. These friendships enable the characters to cooperatively resist, and even thwart, masculine domination. This paper focuses on Bushnell's *Lipstick Jungle*, with references to *Sex and the City*, to examine the relationships among female characters in a chick lit context. Wharton's novels provide contrasting reference points for female characters of the naturalist tradition.

Historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes the female friendship of the nineteenth century U.S. as a "long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women" (1). Women formed relationships between friends, siblings, mothers and daughters, and other female relatives, creating a world in which "men made but a shadowy appearance" (Smith-Rosenberg 2). The descriptions of these Victorian female relationships are but predecessors of the strong female bonds Bushnell depicts. While Bushnell's characters may not forge sexual relationships with each other (as was not uncommon during the Victorian era), they nonetheless rely on each other for emotional support and intimacy. Smith-Rosenberg's following description applies perfectly to the friendships Bushnell represents: "Women, who had little status or power in the larger world of male concerns, possessed status and power in the lives and worlds of other women" (14).

Wharton's and Bushnell's works provide examples of female relationships and the male-female gender dynamics in their respective times. While Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* must "go for oneness and unity, by suffering death" (Wharton, *House* 325; Mitchell 293), the characters in *Lipstick Jungle* find romantic fulfillment and achieve the professional success that makes them the independent individuals that women during Wharton's time fought so hard to

become. The difference derives from not only the historical distance between the two authors but also the characteristics of the genres that they represent. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* are naturalist texts, representing real life with no sugar coating. Lily's fate is "shaped by the capitalistic exchange values of her society [and] by its patriarchal power structure" (Pizer 242). Similarly, Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* can survive in New York only by finding a male companion to support her. Women in Wharton's novels are often on the outside of society, facing loneliness and even ostracism from men and women alike; their crime is their supposed violation of social taboos by attempting to break away from their passive roles as mere objects in society (Wershoven 14–16).

Compare with this the emergence of "chick lit" in the mid-1990s, "the Age of Un-Innocence" (Bushnell, *Sex 2*). Spearheaded by such works as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* from 1996 and Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, the genre opened a venue for female authors to write about a wide range of topics, from dating and shopping to women's desire for both career and domestic partnership. The genre's popularity attests to the changes that have taken place among its primary readers: Women desire both "urban fairytales," where the heroines are princesses that embody femininity, as well as career success stories, where the characters are empowered, professional women with ambitious outlooks.

Both *Lipstick Jungle* and *Sex and the City*, each turned into a television series (and a film in the case of the latter), feature groups of close female friends, markedly absent in Wharton's novels. In fact one of Ellen Olenska's "social taboos" is her choice to speak with men rather than with women, resulting from her lack of female friends (Wharton, *Age 55*). In *Lipstick Jungle*, Victory Ford, Wendy Healy, and Nico O'Neilly are three self-proclaimed "best friends" living in New York, who are high-profile, cosmopolitan, urban professionals: a fashion designer, a

president of a movie production company, and an editor-in-chief of a widely-circulated magazine. New York City itself plays a significant part in their narratives, for Bushnell makes the city a recurring character in her novels. Yet despite the centrality of New York in the texts, it is still an inherently masculine space: Men dominate the city regardless of how hard women work to gain an equal place in it. Bushnell describes the corporate scene as a game, and a backstabbing, male-centered one at that. In a scene in which Nico finds her male boss attempting to take credit for a crucial meeting that she herself had painstakingly set up, she sees his action as being “no less than an open declaration of war” (Bushnell, *Lipstick* 41).

Yet New York City, brimming with the power of capitalism, in a way enables women to compete with men equally with their financial power. While wandering through Sotheby’s with Victory, Nico tries on a necklace of blue diamond estimated to cost between 1.2 and 1.5 million dollars. When Victory protests that neither one of them can afford such a piece, Nico simply says, “You never know, Vic. We might be able to someday” (Bushnell 315). The city’s materialism offers the women the possibility to one day be on equal footings with men through sheer financial power alone. It is in this moment at Sotheby’s, in fact, that Nico is moved by excitement and her sense of power to tell Victory that she is having an affair—with a younger man who also happens to be a Calvin Klein underwear model.

Smith-Rosenberg describes instances in female, homosocial relationships when “young women permitted themselves to express a great deal of hostility toward peer-group men. When unacceptable suitors appeared, girls might even band together to harass them” (20). This is akin to the criticism that the women in Bushnell’s novels give each other, not only to protect them from bad men, but also to protect themselves from losing their female friends to men who are

unworthy. Victory tries to convince Nico that her affair with Kirby, the underwear model, is damaging to both Nico and her family:

“You can never ultimately make a marriage work with a man who lacks character. It’s always going to end up a disaster....But you chose wisely from the beginning. Your marriage works. You don’t want to let a...a *fuck*...ruin something that works so well for you.” (Bushnell 402)

Although Victory knows how much Nico is attracted to Kirby, she gives her honest opinion in an effort to protect both Nico and their friendship from male intrusion.

The power and necessity of female friendships extend beyond New York City. In Bushnell’s depiction of the fashion industry, an integral part of *Lipstick Jungle*, a character fighting in New York and global corporate spheres is more powerless as a female who is alone than as a male who is a non-white Asian. Victory visits Mr. Ikito, a Japanese businessperson who oversees production and sales of her designs in Japan, after a critically underwhelming fall show at New York Fashion Week. Mr. Ikito criticizes Victory for poor sales, and makes the proposition that they use a “ghost designer” to design her Japanese line (Bushnell, *Lipstick* 63). As a female, Victory must defend herself and her art even against men outside of New York. While in some contexts Mr. Ikito may be the weaker character because of his Japanese nationality, his status as a male trumps even Victory’s status as a white female. “Miss Victory,” he tells her not so subtly, “You cannot say no to my proposition! You woman. You listen to what man say. What man say is better” (Bushnell 72). In her dealings with Mr. Ikito, Victory has no support from her female friends. In fact, Mr. Ikito’s weapon against Victory—a certain Miss Matsuda, hired by Mr. Ikito to design Victory’s Japanese line—is a woman who does not form the female friendship so crucial for Bushnell’s characters to fight against hegemonic masculinity.

Bushnell portrays Japanese business practice as an entity that cannot be penetrated without the bonds of female friendship.

It is also through encouragement from other females that the characters in *Lipstick Jungle* gain strength and inspiration. When Victory is desperately searching for an idea for her new collection, she finds it in a comment from a woman on the Metro:

“Hey girl.” The tapper was a dark-skinned young woman in glasses.... “I like your pants. Sequins during the day. That’s cool.”...The words “I like your pants” echoed in her brain like a suddenly cheery slogan. ... It was about more than just pants, though. It was Fashion with a capital “F”—the international language of girlspeak, the icebreaker, the compliment and soother, the automatic membership to the club. “Thank you,” Victory said kindly, feeling all warm and fuzzy toward this young woman who was a stranger, but not so strange anymore now that they were united in the common ground of liking her pants. (Bushnell 245)

This encounter with a female stranger empowers Victory by serving exactly the purpose of a female friendship: The stranger’s words compliment Victory on her essence as a woman and an individual—her clothes and her career—and they “unite in the common ground” of being female.

For the women in *Lipstick Jungle*, their friendships with each other are “invaluable, because it [is] only with women that you could really be vulnerable” (Bushnell 77). Yet this paradigm works in Bushnell’s novels but not in Wharton’s, for only in the capitalistic, corporate world of 21st century America can female characters actively participate, to come together through their friendships to pursue their individual professions and desires. Bushnell is aware of the genre she is fighting against: These characters in fact revise the naturalist tradition by

thwarting it; they take the hegemonic masculinity and its commodification of women and willingly embrace the rampant capitalist qualities to appropriate them to their advantage.

It is interesting to examine the process by which the two Bushnell novels were turned into TV shows and film, and also what prompted that process. The success of the works' translation from text to visual, as well as the transposition of readership to viewership, raises interesting questions about the depiction of the novel's content in the media, and how representations of women and female friendships have changed over the last decade. It is also notable that, when the *Sex and the City* film opened in early summer of 2008, many women went to see the film with their girlfriends, making the viewing a bonding event, ranging from a girls' night out to even a long-distance trip (Cieply).

Yet despite the social changes that have taken place in the last century, the construction of gender remains the same: Masculinity is still the "anti-feminine," and being a woman still means that one is relegated to writing "chick lit" rather than high literature. Female characters find few allies in men and must turn to each other for support and strength. Yet regardless of what has changed in the world of women writers, perhaps Bushnell's characters can have for themselves, through their female relationships, what Wharton's Lily and Ellen could not: a stake in, if not a reclamation of, the city as a feminine place, and a toast to their friendships and New York City, their sometimes unfriendly but always thrilling "Lipstick Jungle" (Bushnell 532).



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